

When the West Was Young

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The Rise of "Sockless" Jerry Simpson

AMONG THE unique and remarkable characters brought to public notice and notoriety by the political upheaval of thirty years ago, no one attained to greater fame or secured wider celebrity than "Sockless" Jerry Simpson of "Madison Lodge," as the facetious newspaper reporters dubbed him.

Jerry was born in the province of New Brunswick in 1842 of Scotch ancestry. His father migrated to the United States, when Jerry was a very little boy, and settled in the state of Michigan. Although of an alert mind and possessed of a real hunger for knowledge, Jerry's educational opportunities were exceedingly limited. He was illiterate, so far as the branches taught in the schools were concerned, but was a voracious reader and, endowed with a remarkable memory, he managed to store his mind with more than the ordinary equipment of really good literature, so that he was entitled to be called a well-read man.

At the outbreak of the Civil War Simpson enlisted, but served only a few months until discharged for disability. After the close of the war he became a sailor on the Great Lakes, and gradually rose to the position of captain on a lake freighter, a position which requires a large degree of resourcefulness and courage. During a fearful storm his ship was driven ashore near Ludington and it was largely owing to the masterful courage and coolness of Jerry Simpson that the lives of all the crew were saved.

During the seventies he decided to go to Kansas and settled in Jackson County, where he engaged in farming and stock raising with some success, but concluded that there were better opportunities in the free-range country and went to Barber County along in '83 or '84. It was an unfortunate time to get into the cattle business. He had hardly got fairly started when the terrible winter of '85-86 came on and nearly wiped his herd off the face of the earth. His cows died faster than he could skin them and spring found him nearly broke. He had come to the county with some \$10,000.

In 1886 the Union Labor party was organized and the old-time Greenbackers, of whom Jerry was one, promptly joined it. Jerry had already demonstrated

candidate, S. M. Scott, of McPherson, the author of a pamphlet on the sub-treasury, was the man to be nominated, but Scott could not get it into his mind that it was possible to overcome the majority of 14,000 rolled up by the Republicans only two years before and pushed the proffered honor aside. Jerry Simpson had been called on to make a speech and caught the crowd. With Scott out of it the delegates turned to the ex-sailor and nominated him. They builded better than they knew. Under the conditions then prevailing Jerry Simpson was an ideal candidate. He was a good talker, possessed of a ready wit and with an instinctive and correct appraisal of the value of publicity.

A correspondent of the Wichita Eagle accused him of wearing no socks. Jerry did not attempt to deny the charge and charged in turn that his opponent, Col. J. R. Hollowell, wore silk hose. He wove this skilfully into his speeches and roused unbounded enthusiasm by the turn. He confessed his poverty, and his audience, carried away with the zeal of crusaders, threw the few dollars they had in their pockets onto the platform to help pay the campaign expenses of their candidate.

The Irishman and the Jew

JERRY was a good story teller. His stories were not new, but an old story well told is often as effective as a brand new one. He covered the Republican platform, adopted at Dodge City, with ridicule and amid howls of delight told the following story: A Jew and an Irishman were crossing a stream in a boat when it occurred to the Irishman that he would convert the Jew. He demanded that the descendant of Abraham renounce his faith and acknowledge the divinity of Christ and the Virgin Mary. The Jew refused, whereupon the Irishman threw him out into the water. He came up choking and spluttering and tried to climb back into the boat, but the Irishman refused to let him in unless he would confess and give up his "hathenism." The Jew still refusing, the Irishman shoved him under again and held him there until he was almost drowned. At last he let him come to the surface, gasping and almost speechless. When he was able to talk, seeing no evidence of mercy on the part of the Hibernian, he said that he would renounce and confess. "Oim glad to hear that," said the Irishman, "but Oim av the opinion that if iver yez get to land, yez will take it back, so Oim goin' to drown yez now and save your immortal soul." The application was that the Republican party should be killed while it was in a repentant frame of mind.

The Election a Surprise

THE RESULT of the election was a surprise even to the most sanguine of Jerry's supporters. A Republican majority of 14,000 was succeeded by a Populist majority of more than 8,000, and Jerry Simpson suddenly found himself one of the most talked of men in the United States.

To his credit let it be said that he did not lose his head. In Congress he rapidly acquired polish and was recognized as the leader of his party. His political views broadened; his crudities of speech were mostly abandoned. He held his own in the rough and tumble



JERRY SIMPSON

A unique character who got into Congress as the "Sockless Statesman."

debates in the Lower House and gained favor with the then Speaker of the House, Tom Reed, of Maine.

In 1892 he was re-elected, but the Populist party had already passed the crest and was on the decline. His majority of more than 8,000 was reduced to less than 2,000 and two years later was wiped out entirely when Chester I. Long defeated him by a comfortable majority.

In 1896 the free silver issue swept over Kansas and Jerry was elected for the third time, but with the subsidence of that he was defeated and retired from public life. It may be said for him that while he was an original Greenbacker he never was at heart in favor of free and unlimited coinage of silver at the ratio of 16 to 1. Naturally possessed of a keen and logical mind he saw the fallacy of the argument in favor of a fixed ratio between the two metals, but believed in the Greenback theory that there should be no intrinsic value in money.

Jerry was naturally a radical both in politics and religion. Before he became especially interested in politics he was known to his acquaintances as a "free thinker" or infidel. He had accumulated a number of books defending his views, such as Thomas Payne's "Age of Reason," Huxley and Ingersoll. He loaned them to a family by the name of Jesse to read, but shortly afterward most of the Jesses were converted by an evangelist and decided that the first thing they ought to do was to make a bonfire of Jerry Simpson's books, which they did.

In his lake experience Jerry Simpson had learned to be a very fair rough and tumble fighter, although never inclined to quarrel. A burly blacksmith became offended at a remark made by Jerry and announced that he intended to whip him and give him a plenty while he was at it. He attacked Jerry without warning, but got the surprise of his life. In less than a minute it was the blacksmith who was whipped, while Jerry had not suffered so much as a scratch. Afterward the blacksmith became one of Jerry's greatest admirers and staunchest political supporters.

It has been a good many years now since Jerry Simpson's body was laid to rest. As the years speed on there is a growing kindliness that honors his memory. He was a man of more than ordinary native ability, a character such as could only be produced in a country of free speech and the open door of opportunity.

THIS is an interesting sketch of the remarkable rise, 30 years ago, of a national character in politics, written by the man who first ran against him.

The Dearborn Independent is gathering a series of stories of Pioneer Days, not only from the West but from other parts of the United States and Canada, and more will follow.

some ability as a speaker in country lyceums and the like and his party in Barber County selected him as its candidate for the legislature. I happened to have the honor of running against him and while I defeated him it was not a victory to blow about.

Two years later he was again a candidate and, as that happened to be the year when Kansas rolled up a Republican majority of 82,000, Jerry was buried under the general landslide. There were those who predicted that he would never come back again, but they had no vision of the future.

Corn Used as Fuel

EIGHTEEN EIGHTY-NINE was the greatest corn year of all Kansas history, but the price went down until corn sold at 10 cents per bushel or less and was burned for fuel all over Kansas. A few years before, the people of the state had plunged into debt with a recklessness seldom if ever equalled and now pay day had come and 10-cent corn and 40-cent wheat to pay with. It is not very remarkable that the people saw red, and talked of the altar of Mammon, the great red dragon and the "crime of '73." The words of the agitator fell on fertile ground. The Farmers' Alliance spread like a fire on the dry prairie driven by the high wind.

Too late the Republican leaders became alarmed and decided that the way to retain power was to get up a platform about as radical as anything suggested by the Alliance and then release the candidate from all party allegiance and authorize him to pay no attention to the party caucus. The concessions only caused derision and jeers on the part of the Alliance men and it was in this frame of mind that Alliance delegates met in the spring of 1890 to nominate a candidate for Congress.

Jerry Simpson went to the convention as a delegate, but his name had not been mentioned as a probable

chinery will run not less, but more, smoothly than it ever does at present. "In regard to the technical services," says the best pronouncement that has yet been published, "steps have already been taken to secure the best talent. No contractor can obtain better men than those already approached by the Guild Committee. It is in the labor department that we shall find the widest divergence from existing practice. Here democratic control must prevail from the chief director down to the most obscure job. It is specifically set out that the direction and discipline of the whole labor force shall be confined to men of good trade union standing. Whether the committee shall appoint foremen or whether they shall be chosen by their colleagues on the site is of no great consequence. The important thing is that the work shall proceed with the assent and good will of the workers concerned. As for discipline, the trade union officials have no kind of fear. They are satisfied that it will be superior in every way to the discipline imposed from above to which the men give only half-hearted and sullen obedience."

Hope for Better Workmanship

IT IS not to be denied that if these things be true the experiment is not only of enormous national importance but is also of a highly encouraging and stimulating kind. There are other grounds also for hopefulness. It is commonly said here that there are only about 460 bricklayers available in Manchester. The

Manchester Workmen to Build Own Houses

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Guild Committee say that there may be only this number ready to work on dwelling houses under the existing system, but that they can lay their hands on at least 750. They say also that whereas a bricklayer under present conditions will lay only about four hundred bricks a day he will lay six or seven hundred or more if he feels that he is once more working on his own as a skilled craftsman among his fellows and has a personal and responsible interest in the quality of the work which he produces. They point to a big new building in London which was held up during the war and which was finally finished by the workmen themselves without the aid of the contractor and finished, they maintain, more rapidly and with a better quality of work than had been thought to be possible under ordinary conditions.

Certainly the spirit in which the whole thing has been taken up by every grade of workman in Manchester does suggest that in this scheme the men see a means of putting their energies into a creative labor which they will take a pride in doing. Very shortly we shall see a National Guild formed on the model of this Manchester project and if the local experiment succeeds it will eventually be merged in the national organization and will have given an impulse to a very striking change in our social and economic system. No one quite knows what the experiment may lead to, but assuredly there has been none in recent years which contains the seeds of such striking developments in the system with which we have grown up.